

# Child Abuse in Japan

**David Gough**

*Few cases of child abuse are identified by child care agencies in Japan. Some argue that this is because the culturally specific child care and family relations in Japan make child maltreatment less likely to occur. On the other hand, there are also cultural features that might act to increase the likelihood of child abuse. Explanations for seeming differences in prevalence are discussed, along with a consideration of differences in concepts of appropriate care, child maltreatment, thresholds for case definition, and levels of public and professional awareness about child abuse. Service responses and current developments in child abuse in Japan are also briefly reviewed.*

**Keywords:** Japan; child abuse; cross cultural comparison; definitions of maltreatment

## Introduction

Throughout history children in many cultures have been seen as expendable or as a possession that could be traded for profit. Japan is no exception to this. Infanticide was a common form of population control amongst the poor in the Edo period (1603-1867) and was called 'Mabiki' — an agricultural term for 'thinning out' (Ikeda, 1995). This partly explains why the population remained stable at 25 million from the mid 17th to mid 19th century before climbing to the current population of 120 million (Kouno & Johnson, 1995).

Human trafficking was outlawed in 1872 after the Meiji restoration, but both infanticide and the sale of children continued up into the 20th century and to after the 1933 Child Abuse Prevention Act (Ikeda, 1995). After the introduction of the new constitution in 1947, a number of further human rights and child welfare laws were introduced with the government undertaking surveys on the circumstances of children in society including known cases of child abuse. Recently there have been a number of further surveys of known cases of abuse (see Table 1).

The recent medical and social welfare literature on child abuse began in the late 1970s following on from the re-discovery of child abuse in the United States (Ikeda, 1979). Since that time there has been an increasing number of publications about abuse in both the public and professional media. From an initial focusing on physical abuse and neglect, more work is appearing on sexual abuse. Recent research includes Ikeda and Satoh's (1992) survey reporting that at least 73% of students had received unwanted sexual experiences in childhood (mostly on public transport by male molesters known as 'chikan')

and Takii's (1992) finding that 5.4% of residents at a correctional home for young women had been victims of sexual abuse by male relatives or maternal boyfriends. Recent books include an edited collection about known cases of sexual abuse (Kitayama, 1994) and a personal account of surviving sexual abuse (Hozumi, 1994). Child abuse has also been presented in 'manga' comics and novels such as 'Fatherfucker' (Uchida, 1993), the largely autobiographical story of a young woman abused by her step father, and the more sensational 'Coin Locker Babies' (Murakami, 1980), where two boys abandoned at birth in left luggage lockers make it their life mission to seek vengeance against their mothers.

English language books translated into Japanese include the Open University Course set book (Stainton Rogers, Hevey & Ash, 1989), a medical guide to the recognition of abuse (Rose, 1985), the Maria Colwell Report (Department of Health and Security, 1974) and 'Understanding Child Abuse' (Jones *et al.*, 1987). *The Courage to Heal* (Bass & Davis, 1988) is currently being translated.

Despite the increased discussion about child abuse and some practice developments by special interest groups, the reported incidence of child abuse by child guidance centres is low, at about 0.07 cases per thousand children (based on 2,000 cases per year as reported by Directors of Public Child Guidance Centres, 1989), much less than the 3 per thousand cases on many UK child protection registers (Department of Health, 1993). This difference in incidence is central to any discussion of child abuse in Japan as it affects the extent that child abuse is considered an important social issue requiring society's attention.

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**Table 1 Main Surveys of Known Cases of Abuse in Japan**

AUTHORS	SAMPLE	CASES
Ministry of Health and Welfare, 1948 (cited by Ikeda, 1995)	92 child guidance centres	1063 cases of abuse 306 cases of abandonment 366 of child labour
Ministry of Health and Welfare (1973)	139 child guidance centres	26 cases of abuse 139 of abandonment 137 of neonaticide
Ikeda (1979)	cases in Chiba Prefecture in 1976 and 1977	48 child abuse cases
Medico Legal Society (Naito, 1984)	autopsies on battered children between 1968 and 1977	186 cases, 130 killed biological parents
Council of Child Welfare Institutions (1980)	22,583 children in 404 child welfare institutions	3,000 (13%) abused 154 sexual abuse
Child Abuse Study Group (1985)	164 child guidance centres in 1983	416 cases: 54% physical, 12% psychological, 27% neglect, 11% sexual abuse
Kobayashi, N. & Naito (1986)	63.5% response rate from 1,006 hospitals with paediatric cases in 1983	90 hospitals reported 231 cases
Directors of Child Guidance Centres (1989)	167 centres in 6 months of 1988	1,039 cases: 26% physical, 22% abandonment, 38% neglect, 7% psychological, and 3% children forbidden to go to school
Kobayashi, M. <i>et al</i> (1995)	Osaka between 1983 and 1987	403 cases: 57% physical, 36% neglect, 7% sexual
Kobayashi <i>et al</i> (1993)	Osaka in 1990	318 cases reported
Saito <i>et al</i> (1994)	49.2% response rate from 535 protective care facilities on children entering March 1991 to March 1992	comparison of data on 579 abused and 263 control children
Uchiyama (1994)	cases of abuse known to police in 1992	250 cases, 57% physical abuse, 21% neglect, 12% abandoned, 10% sexual abuse

*Information in Table mainly adapted from Ikeda (1995)*

Four main explanations are invoked to explain this low incidence. First, that child abuse and other social problems occur less frequently in Japan compared to Western societies for cultural reasons. Second, that concepts of child maltreatment are qualitatively different in Japan. Third, that a lower definitional threshold for abuse is applied resulting in lower abuse statistics in Japan. Fourth, that situations that most would agree to be abusive do commonly occur but are hidden from public view.

#### **Culture of child care**

According to this view, cultural differences make violence more or less common in different societies (Levinson, 1989). There are large social cultural differences between Japan and the West and one would expect some of these differences to be reflected in family relationships (Goodwin, 1995), child care (Hendry, 1986), and the nature and extent of child abuse. Although such arguments seem parsimonious, the difficulty is in being sure that the cultural differences have an effect in the way hypothesized. For all the examples of cultural effects

likely to minimise the extent of abuse, counter examples and arguments can be found.

### **Value of children**

Japanese society values children; young children in particular are considered to be favoured by the gods and to be able to do as they wish with little parental intervention. Maybe societies that value children are less likely to abuse them.

Although children are highly valued in Japan, this does not necessarily mean that all children are so valued or that a desire to care well for children is always achieved in practice. In a survey of cases of child abuse known to hospital paediatric departments in 1986 (Tanimura, Matsui & Kobayashi, 1990), it was found that 10% of cases involved multiple birth children (20 sets of twins and one set of triplets), which contrasts with a 0.6% rate for twins in the general population. For 17 of these multiple birth cases, only one of the children was abused and 16 of these 17 abused children (94%) had congenital or developmental disease or retardation. None of the multiple birth cases where more than one child was abused had such problems. The authors conclude that twins are at high risk of abuse in Japan, and the risk is particularly high for developmentally impaired members of twin pairs.

A further counter argument is that despite the high value put on children in Japan, it was only relatively recently that infanticide and the sale of children were totally halted. Child abuse statistics are low, but child homicides are relatively high according to maternal and child health statistics. Homicide is the seventh most common cause of death for children aged 1 to 4 years with a rate of 0.7 per 100,000 children (Ministry of Health and Welfare, 1992). Deaths of infants from presumed abuse is 7.4 per 100,000 live births, which compares to rates of 9.8 and 3.9 per 100,000 in the United States and the United Kingdom, respectively (Belsey cited in Unicef, 1994).

### **Parental methods of control**

It can be argued that parental methods of control in Japan are principally non interventive and depend upon parental patience and example, and are less likely to lead to abuse. The idea is that the child internalises the parental model rather than it being imposed by intervention and punishment. In the West, physical punishment is common, but it is criticised by some commentators as being ineffective, an infringement of children's rights, and being the (wrongly) currently acceptable end of the continuum that ends in physical abuse (Leach, 1993). A counter argument is that, as in the West, much domestic violence occurs in private in the family and that the lack of public displays of violence does not mean that these methods are not used behind closed doors by parents in

the family home or by teachers in schools. Public reputations are also very important in Japan, which restricts people's willingness to reveal negative aspects about their family or school.

### **Traditional family and gender roles**

Maybe abuse is less likely to occur in Japan because the traditional family is a strong institution with traditional gender roles of male breadwinner and female housewife and carer for the children. Non traditional family forms and lack of stable carers are risk factors for abuse. Whatever one's view of the appropriateness of traditional gender power relations, they provide a more secure community and individual family base for child care and stable selective attachments than the high rates of divorce, single parents, and reconstituted and other non traditional family forms found increasingly in the West. The counter argument is that family and traditional gender roles are so strong in Japan that firstly, they create stress for parents, and secondly, what occurs in families is not open to inspection or to intervention by outsiders. There are thus few limits on parental powers over their children. An extreme example is when a father in serious economic or other difficulties commits family suicide believing that this would be best for his wife and family.

### **Socio-economic and other stressors**

Japan is a relatively homogeneous and stable society without the racial, religious, or socio-economic divisions found in many Western countries. Although there are economic differences in society, there are not large under classes of people living in severe socio economic stress nor is there a sub-culture of public violence. Such stressors are statistical risk factors for child abuse for both families and neighbourhoods in the West (see for example, Gelles & Cornell, 1990).

A counter argument is that there are many stresses in Japanese society to compensate for the lack of Western style stresses. Families live in cramped housing, mothers often have to care for their aged in-laws or other relatives, fathers work very long hours and rarely see their children or help in the house, mothers are under pressure to be good mothers and to cope in their child rearing role. Children or families who are considered to be odd in any way (including Japanese who have lived some time abroad) may be rejected, criticised, and not offered support by others. Also, Western style expectations of individual needs and personal development are spreading in Japan leading to aspirations that many are unable to fulfil in the current society. Many women, for example, aspire to life long working careers, whilst most companies still prefer to only employ young women who are encouraged to leave for marriage and parenthood after a few years of work.

Research has shown that socio-economic and other stressors are common in the known cases of child abuse. A recent survey in Osaka (Kobayashi *et al.*, 1995) found that parents in abusive families were often judged to have personality problems, marital conflict, to be socially isolated, and be suffering from economic stress. Children had behavioural problems and developmental delay.

Similar findings of high rates of child, parental, and family problems were also reported by the study by Directors of Child Guidance Centres (1989). Further information on case characteristics is provided by a survey comparing abuse cases with other cases entering protective care facilities in Japan (Saito, Tezuka & Hasegawa, 1994). The abuse cases were significantly more likely to involve children who had been premature, to have developmental problems, to be developmentally delayed, to have suffered injuries, and to exhibit emotional and/or behavioural disturbances. The parents were also more likely than controls to have divorced, to live in reconstituted families and to have abused alcohol. In physical abuse cases, fathers were more likely than controls to have been violent towards their wives. In neglect cases, they were more likely to have deserted their families. Mothers were more likely than controls to have experienced depression, to have deserted their families, to have had extra marital affairs, and to have over spent money. The control group cases were more likely to have had imprisoned step fathers and schizophrenic mothers. Though of interest, the results are difficult to interpret without details of the control group cases and the manner in which case workers completed questionnaires on abuse and control cases.

### Concepts of maltreatment

Another version of the cultural argument is that child abuse exists in Japan but is different in kind to abuse in the West. Concepts of appropriate and inappropriate child care including child abuse are intrinsically socially defined concepts so are likely to be defined differently in different cultures. Different forms of child care and discipline may therefore be considered acceptable and unacceptable in Japan. People tell me of being punished in childhood by being shut in cupboards or out of doors rather than receiving physical chastisement that is so common in the West. Others tell me of the shock of visiting Britain and seeing parents walking their young children with reins as if they were walking their dog. Leaving a baby to sleep at night alone in another room rather than with their mother is also thought to be rather heartless.

There may also be cultural differences in the extremes of inappropriate and abusive child care. In Britain and America there are distressing cases of sexual homicide of children. In Japan, I hear about cases of family suicide and cases of emotional abuse. For example, I have met two women whose fathers ate the family pet (a fish and a dog) as an act of spite towards their daughters.

It is difficult to make general statements about countries on the basis of anecdotal statements and individual cases, but some preliminary data on cultural differences in concepts of appropriate discipline is provided by a student survey (Gough, 1995b). Japanese female students were significantly more likely to consider physical restraint by tying, loss of privileges, and light spanking with a belt to be abusive than American members of the public surveyed by Rosonke and Pelton (1982). In contrast, the Japanese students were significantly less likely than American respondents to label squeezing to produce pain, slapping of face, or locking a child in a room as abuse. Also, 22% of Japanese female students thought it acceptable to leave a child under two years of age alone in a car for over ten minutes whilst the parents went shopping. Such cultural differences were illustrated recently by the arrest of a Japanese couple in California for leaving their young child alone in their car whilst shopping.

Research by Noh Ahn and Gilbert (1992) has also shown cross cultural differences in the appropriateness of parent and child bathing, sleeping, and intimate touching in various cultures. Asian respondents (living in the United States and not including any Japanese) accepted parent-child bathing and sleeping for significantly older children than Caucasian respondents. Genital touching also had different symbolic meaning with nearly half of Vietnamese and Korean respondents but only 2% of Caucasian respondents considering it acceptable for a grandfather to touch playfully his three year old grandson's genitals with pride.

The danger with culturally based arguments is that they are easy to over apply if not based on empirical research that has excluded other explanations. For example, there have been stories in the press of mother-son incest arising from the strong nature of this relationship in Japan and the important maternal role of ensuring the son succeeds at school. Children are very busy with education, many going almost daily to evening crammar schools. Better for the mother to service the son than that he should waste important time and emotional energy experimenting with relationships with same aged girls. A telephone hot line for adolescents received several calls from males alleging maternal incest which has led some to argue that this is the dominant form of sexual abuse in Japan (Kitayama & Arahari, 1994). The evidence, though, is that nearly all cases of sexual abuse known to police or health and welfare professionals are, just as in other countries, perpetrated by males against male and female children. There is also considerable evidence of male sexual interest in female children shown by the Ikeda and Satoh (1992) student survey and the extent that the pornography and prostitution industry is preoccupied with images of school age girls.

Cultural differences must have some effect on the prevalence of child abuse in Japan but it is dangerous

immediately to accept seemingly parsimonious cultural explanations. Many cultural explanations are simplistic in invoking a number of single variable differences rather than determining the nature of interactions between variables. There is a tendency, for example, to suggest that people are more polite, less aggressive, or less likely to abuse children in a particular society, rather than determining under which circumstances people are more or less polite or aggressive (or likely to maltreat children, however that is defined).

### **Definitional thresholds**

Another possibility is that child abuse fitting Western definitional criteria occurs frequently in Japan but is not labelled as such due to higher level or different operational criteria. The serious nature of the known cases of child abuse in Japan suggest that high definitional criteria are being applied with the less extreme cases of physical or psychological abuse being ignored or being seen as other types of family difficulties.

The survey of cases known to a range of agencies in Osaka Prefecture (Kobayashi *et al.*, 1995) found that most known cases concerned physical abuse (57%) and neglect (37%) with few cases of sexual abuse (7%). The cases identified were relatively severe with 5% deaths, 52% life threatening and the remainder classified as moderate. There were high rates of family stress and other child and parent problems and 35% of children were admitted to protective care. This is in contrast to much milder cases known to a telephone hot line in Osaka (Kobayashi *et al.*, 1995). There are therefore likely to be a group of moderate cases existing between the serious cases identified by the main health and welfare and the mild cases known to the telephone hot line.

Cases known to the police have been studied by Uchiyama (1994) with 250 cases being identified in one year. The majority were physical abuse cases (57%), but with many cases of neglect or abandonment (33%). The serious level of the cases is indicated by the finding that nearly 16% of the children were dead though some of these were abandoned dead infants who may have been born dead. The 25 cases of sexual abuse all concerned female victims.

The effects of definitional criteria is also shown by the classification of child homicides. Child homicides are relatively frequent in Japan, according to health statistics (Ministry of Health and Welfare, 1992; Belsey, 1993), but many of these cases are not included in the main child abuse data derived from child guidance centres. Similarly, family suicide where a parent kills himself, his children, and his spouse, is not usually considered under the term child abuse, even though it equates to intra-familial child homicide. There are also differences in which forms of intra and extra familial assaults on children are labelled child abuse. In the West, the term child abuse is typically

used for intra and extra familial sexual abuse, but not for extra familial physical abuse by strangers. The coverage of terms is more consistent in Japan with both sexual or physical assaults by strangers being described as assaults rather than child abuse. Thus the frequent sexual molestation of girls and young women by men on public transport and in the street (Ikeda & Satoh, 1992) is considered unacceptable but would not be normally described as child maltreatment. An assault by a stranger is simply an assault.

### **Awareness explanations**

Another possible explanation is that child abuse is common but largely hidden in Japan. Many people have detailed the way that child abuse occurs in secret and requires high awareness and confidence in children, parents, other members of the public, and professionals to openly identify (Finkelhor, 1993). Twenty to thirty years ago, there was little awareness or identification of physical, and particularly sexual abuse in the West. The slightly higher rates of reported sexual abuse by younger respondents in some population prevalence studies (e.g. Siegal *et al.*, 1987) suggest that there may have been a slight increase in prevalence of sexual abuse in the last twenty years, but not sufficient to account for the massive increases in reported cases. The implication is that sexual abuse was occurring before but was not being identified.

The rapid change in awareness and rates of reporting indicate the extent that child abuse was previously hidden from view in many Western countries. The same may be true for present day Japan, particularly when there is such potential loss of face from being perceived as failing as a parent or from being known to have been victimised. The effect of cultural factors may thus be upon the process of case identification rather than the actual occurrence of abuse.

### **Service responses**

Child guidance centres are the main local government agency responsible for assisting children and families in need. There is little known about the cases of mild abuse known to child guidance centres and other agencies beyond the questionnaire surveys summarised in Table 1. The best data is from the Osaka survey (Kobayashi *et al.*, 1995) which found that cases were seen by a range of services, but predominantly by child guidance centres (89%), family and child guidance rooms (37%), welfare offices (37%), and schools and nurseries (44% and 25% respectively). There was less multi-agency involvement in cases referred to hospitals and medical clinics. In over a third of cases (35%), the children were placed in a children's home.

Legal powers of intervention in families where there is child maltreatment are difficult to obtain because of the

complex nature of the law and the reluctance to intervene legally in domestic issues. The simplest methods of legal intervention require parental consent and without this, workers may not have the evidence or the motivation to press for other forms of legal intervention. Even where legal powers are obtained, it is difficult to legally prevent the parents removing the child from such care. I am currently aware of a father who frequently injures his young infant in violent, seemingly jealous outbursts, and who restricts his wife from leaving the house or contacting anyone by telephone. The lead agency in the case is a hospital which offered non specific counselling which the father has now refused. The staff say they are powerless to intervene but are very anxious about the child's welfare, particularly as they recently had a child abuse death in another case. Child protection intervention laws do exist, but are complex and seem not to be fully utilised. That these laws can be applied is shown by the state response to the Aum Shinrikyo cult, whose members have been accused of murdering underground train passengers with Sarin gas. Many of the children of cult members were removed into care with seemingly little evidence of immediate risks to the children indicating the use of a much lower than usual criteria for intervention.

Health and welfare services in all countries develop a variety of special extra services for children and families with problems, but in Britain an extra level of formally monitored casework has been developed for child protection and children with special needs (Gough, 1995b). There is no such special formal casework response for child protection in Japan. Most of the identified cases of child abuse are known to child guidance centres and will receive casework aimed towards engaging the family and supporting them in their role of child care. Psychologists and psychiatrists may become involved in a minority of cases and such work is often psychodynamic in approach. In addition to cases seen in routine work, there is a number of special projects developed by interested professionals and members of the public in different parts of Japan. As has happened in many other countries, it is often medical doctors who set up these early projects even if the medical profession as a whole is not particularly concerned with the issue of abuse.

Osaka is currently very active in this area with the Association for the Prevention of Child Abuse (APCA) in Osaka, a multi-professional group that holds conferences, developed a child abuse handbook for professionals, and started the first child abuse telephone hot line service. Leading members of APCA also started the Osaka Child Abuse Prevention Research Group that undertook the Osaka surveys (see Kobayashi *et al.*, 1995). Osaka is unusual to the extent that these developments are integrated into the mainstream health and welfare services, although paediatricians are still unhappy about the low level of intervention provided by child guidance centres to the cases that paediatricians refer to them

(Kobayashi, M., personal communication).

There are many other smaller special projects in other parts of Japan. Tokyo has several very separate groups including paediatricians at the National Children's Hospital, the Center for Child Abuse Prevention (CCAP) with its telephone hot line and a newsletter, and the headquarters of the Ministry of Health and Welfare. Recently, special interest groups in sexual abuse have developed. For professionals and survivors, there is the 'We' group in Yokohama. For survivors, there are several groups including SCSA (Stop Child Sexual Abuse).

### **Future developments**

It is likely that public and professional awareness of child abuse will continue to increase resulting in increased case identification. The Ministry of Health and Welfare has responded to the increased awareness and concern about child abuse by beginning to designate some established child care services as special centres for child abuse. There are benefits from these designated centres being part of mainstream services, but sceptics worry that the designation is mainly cosmetic and that little will be achieved in practice.

The development of child abuse work in the short term is more likely to follow on from increased awareness through the public and professional media and the work of the independently funded child abuse initiatives. There is also much scope for research to address issues such as the extent of population prevalence and Japanese professional and public perceptions of what constitutes child maltreatment. A difficulty is funding because there is no perceived need for such research, and because there is generally less funding of social science research in Japan. Research is likely to follow the pattern in the West where the relatively unproductive studies of the defining characteristics of known cases or of the efficacy of special child abuse interventions are the most likely to be funded (Gough, 1993).

My main contribution to the development of child abuse issues in Japan has been in initiating some cross cultural research on perceptions of child maltreatment and arranging a two day symposium and seminar in Tokyo in 1994 under the auspices of the International Society for the Prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect (Ispcan), in association with CCAP, APCA, and the 'We' Group, with a special seminar on survivors' issues organised by SCSA. This meeting with four invited Western speakers provided the first opportunity for these groups to work together, and has led to preliminary discussions about the formation of a Japanese national child abuse society with an annual national child abuse conference. Hopefully such dialogue can enable Japan to learn from the pitfalls experienced by Western approaches to child abuse and to adapt this knowledge to the particular needs of Japanese children and society.

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